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The Contemporaneity of Archives: Reformulating the Issues of Artistic and Democratic Uses

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The Contemporaneity of Archives: Reformulating the Issues of Artistic and Democratic Uses

Natacha Yahia

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REFERENCES

Jens Emil Sennewald, Agnès Geoffray : *Before the Eye-Lid's Laid* = *avant la pose des paupières* = *Vor's Lid gelegt*, Paris : AICA France ; Bruxelles : La Lettre volée, 2017

A qui appartiennent les images ? : le paradoxe des archives, entre marchandisation, libre circulation et respect des œuvres, Paris : Maison des sciences de l'homme, 2017, (Interventions). Sous la dir. de Sylvie Lindeperg, Ania Szczepanska

Archives au présent, Saint-Denis : Presses Universitaires de Vincennes, 2017, (Esthétiques hors cadre). Sous la dir. de Patrick Nardin, Catherine Perret, Soko Phay, Anna Seiderer
Lost and Living (in) Archives: Collectively Shapping New Memories, Amsterdam : Valiz, 2017, (Making Public). Sous la dir. d'Annet Dekker

Mémoires, traces et archives en création dans les arts de la scène, Rennes : Presses universitaires de Rennes, 2017, (Le Spectaculaire). Sous la dir. de Sophie Lucet, Sophie Proust, avec la collaboration de Delphine Lemonnier-Textier

- 1 Last November, the concept of “essential archives” raised a number of questions among archivists, historians and citizens when *Le Monde* published a Ministry of Culture internal work document which suggested “reducing archives to essential documents.”¹ The report recommends limiting collection in order to reduce conservation costs, thus supporting a financial administration of archives, which public debate has since shown to be incompatible with republican and democratic principles.² Moreover, by threatening archives, this political project also threatens the very roots of the writing of history. In this sense, it is impossible not to approach with renewed interest the abundant recent

publications on what archives do to art and vice versa. These publications are the continuation of an already fruitful reflection on the place of archives in contemporary art practice. Moreover, it has already suggested answers, which usually open new questions, and which can feed current debates and future political decisions.

- 2 Far from leaving the issue of the criteria for selecting documents to the archival discipline or to public authority, the question at hand is to know whether everything should be saved, at the risk of hypermnnesia. This question is at the centre of *Mémoires, traces et archives en création dans les arts de la scène*.³ The numerous contributions edited by Sophie Lucet and Sophie Proust analyse the delicate archival methods used for ephemeral representations and the traces of creative processes, through the angle of the difficulty or the impossibility for archives to record and retranscribe them without risking, in the case of media recordings, to distort or disfigure them.⁴ But the relationship to traces is all the more interesting when it questions the very nature of archives. The specificity of performing arts leads us to reconsider the status of documents and their boundaries with artworks. Nathalie Boulouch demonstrates this with the photographs of performances by Gina Pane kept at the Archives de la critique d'art, by wondering "how [artists] exploit photography by conceiving images as performance."⁵ By involving artists, professionals and researchers, the book creates a dual movement of production and work based on archives. The recurrence of concepts such as legacy and transmission of practices and actions makes it possible to clarify the memorial issues of performing arts. The remembered past becomes a creative impetus capable of inventing new forms.
- 3 It is impossible, faced with heterogeneous representations, understandings and uses of traces, not to redefine the concept of archives. The publications discussed here, offer, mainly through collections of articles, a wide constellation of viewpoints that all share common theoretical ground. Throughout the different books, a shared legacy is outlined, made up of references to the work of Jacques Derrida, Arlette Farge, Michel Foucault, Walter Benjamin and Paul Ricœur in particular. Although the reader could expect a questioning of these historical and philosophical references, or at any rate their critical update, some key notions (such as ghostly or fragmentary archives, events, monuments, traces) are simply reused. However, is it possible to renew the definition of and relationship to archives without broadening the framework for thinking about contemporary art practices?
- 4 In this respect, *Archives au présent* probably offers the most significant answers. In their introduction, Catherine Goussef and Pascal Dubourg Glatigny both define the archive from the historian's viewpoint, "for [whom] a document from the past is not necessarily an archive. Archives are unique documents that are rarely circulated, and have undergone an archival process"⁶, which rules out "mementos found in attics or scrap paper discovered in a drawer."⁷ The historian they describe is a tutelar and authoritarian figure who does not seem willing to give much of a role to artists who would like to contribute to history. Artists, for their part, seek "the traces of histories which do not enter dominant narratives"⁸ outside of institutional spaces, as demonstrated by Lotte Arndt with the example of Kapwani Kiwanga's group exhibition, in which she puts scientific discourse to the test. Although the numerous case studies in this publication show the abundant possibilities offered when working with archives, it is unfortunate that the very dissimilar contributions are not connected in any way. For example, the portfolio does not identify the tendency to use showcases, tables and topographical pictures in the exhibition views of the works which are discussed. How do these artists,

who are reportedly worried “by the historicising recording of their work”⁹, succeed in shaping a dynamic relationship to archives and artworks while using rigid documentation processes?

- 5 A potential redefinition of archives only seems possible by integrating the changes induced by digital technologies, as preservation technology for physical archives and as the original format of some documents. Although it is often mentioned in the publications discussed here, the French translation of digital technologies, *numérique*, eclipses the evocation of the fingerprint and the materiality of the object conjured by the word *digital*, in favour of the mathematical concept of abstract computerised coding.¹⁰ The consequences of vocabulary and its connotations play an important role on different capacities and ways of conceptualising digital technologies. To consider digital memory as a “indefinitely expandable and sharable flux”¹¹ conceals the unreliability of digital technologies, whose conservation standards require the regular migration of content onto new material.¹² Therefore, it is no surprise that the most relevant reflections on the subject come from an English-speaking publication, which mostly discusses the archiving of Internet artworks. The contributions gathered in *Lost and Living (in) Archives: Collectively Shaping New Memories*, successfully reevaluate many axioms, by adopting a dialogical and radical position. This radicalness places collective citizen activism at the heart of the democratic archival process and indeed questions the appropriation of archives by governments and private companies. Against an understanding of the Internet as infinite memory, this book underscores its flaws (such as deleted pages and websites). It also demonstrates its ability to federate spaces for resistance in response to censorship and propaganda.¹³
- 6 The striking and conflictual trait that all these books share is most certainly the criticism of the modifications and aestheticization of visual archives. In *A qui appartiennent les images ? : le paradoxe des archives, entre marchandisation, libre circulation et respect des œuvres*, a fascinating collection of illuminating interviews on the question of the place of audiovisual archives in history, Sylvie Lindeperg and Ania Szczepanska speak with art, archive and law specialists of the falsification of film, through the reactivation of a debate about the colourisation of archives in a documentary, *Apocalypse: la Seconde Guerre mondiale*¹⁴. Would a “regulation code” or a “deontological charter”¹⁵ be desirable in order to create a reasonable and transparent use of archives? Numerous examples encourage greater watchfulness regarding practices which endanger the historicity of images without hindering artists’ absolute freedom to create. To open the debate towards a reflexion on an ethics of gaze and form seems the only way to avoid the pitfall of the manipulation of history, as demonstrated by *Before the Eye-Lid’s Laid*. This book shows the work of artist Agnès Geoffray in poetical dialogue with art critic J. Emil Sennewald, the winner of the AICA France prize in 2016. Although the reparations she performs on archive images are almost surprising by their naivety, her work on their visibility conditions is an assertive reflection on the photographic medium. By its play on reproduction, apparition, confrontation and subtraction, this little book offers, throughout its assembled, uncut pages, the possibility to be handled and seen in a temporality of interstices and *contretemps*, which, far from the sensationalist images of a colourised documentary, confer the depth of a sensitive field onto visual archives.
- 7 One last point that is emphasised by these books will doubtless alert the reader. Although the restrictions that hinder the free consultation of certain archives are well-known¹⁶, the difficulties arising from copyright and the excessive costs of certain audiovisual archives,

hindering their use, are perhaps less obvious¹⁷. Political and economical decisions determining the access to archives and their uses weaken their democratic power and their status as common good. It is generally recognised that a durable solution can be found in dialogue, granted, however, that citizens and professionals' demands are heard and taken into account, in order for the freedom of artists to address history from its archives to live on.

NOTES

1. - Fabre, Clarisse. "Musées, archives, spectacle vivant... : les pistes de réforme envisagées pour la culture", *Le Monde*, 14 November 2017
- Ulrich, Maurice. "Déréglementation. CAP 2022, une offensive en règle menaçant la culture", *L'Humanité*, 15 November 2017
2. - On this point, see the online press review concerning the debate on the concept of "essential archives" updated by the association of French archivists. (archivistes.org)
3. - See "Entretien avec Céline Roux" by Muriel David, *Mémoires, traces et archives en création dans les arts de la scène*, Rennes: PUR, 2017, p.189-194, (Le Spectaculaire)
4. - Banu, Georges. "Préface : de la nécessité des défis", *Mémoires, traces et archives en création dans les arts de la scène*, *Op. cit.*, p. 9
5. - Boulouch, Nathalie. « La performance, entre archives et publication », *Ibid.*, p.98
6. - Goussef, Catherine. Dubourg Glatigny, Pascal. "Tout témoignage matériel du passé fait-il archive ? De la mise en archives et de son usage", *Archives au présent*, Saint-Denis: Presses Universitaires de Vincennes, 2017, p. 13, (Esthétiques hors cadre)
7. - Goussef, Catherine. Dubourg Glatigny, Pascal. "Tout témoignage matériel du passé fait-il archive ? De la mise en archives et de son usage", *Op. cit.*, p. 13
8. - Arndt, Lotte. "Trace Evidence", *Ibid.*, p. 194
9. - *Ibid.*, back cover
10. - On this point, see Bruno Latour, "Ce que le numérique fait aux humanités", a conference given at the BnF on 19 November 2014 (www.bnf.fr)
11. - Lucet, Sophie. "Avant-propos : les instruments de reconfiguration du temps. Traces, héritages et mémoires du spectacle vivant", *Mémoires, traces et archives en création dans les arts de la scène*, *Op. cit.*, p. 17
12. - Similar issues face "immediately technically illegible" audiovisual archives. See: "Des archives comme les autres... ou presque", interview with Agnès Magnien, *A qui appartiennent les images ? : le paradoxe des archives, entre marchandisation, libre circulation et respect des œuvres*, Paris: Maison des sciences de l'homme, 2017, p. 70, (Interventions)
13. - On the question of the conservation of online videos and accounts of contestation, see: Çelikaşlan, Özge. "Autonomous Archiving", *Lost and Living (in) Archives: Collectively Shaping New Memories*, Amsterdam: Valiz, p. 225-241 and Bastajian, Tina. "An invitation: Speculations on Appraisal and a Meandering Cache", *Lost and Living (in) Archives*, *Op. cit.*, p. 243-256
14. - See: Gunthert, André. "Apocalypse ou la trouille de l'histoire", *L'Atelier des icônes*, 7 November 2011 (histoirevisuelle.fr)
15. - "Des Images sans propriétaire : pour une déontologie des usages". Interview with Marie-José Mondzain, *A qui appartiennent les images ?*, *Op. cit.*, p. 119

16. - Manceron, Gilles. "Contribution pour les Etats généraux pour les archives", Comité de vigilance face aux usages publics de l'Histoire, 15 October 2017 (cvuh.blogspot.fr)

17. On this subject, see: Luksch, Manu. « From the Cellar to the Cloud: The Network-Archive as Locus of Power », *Lost and Living (in) Archives*, *Op. cit.*, p. 101-124, which recounts the ordeal to get the rights for the 200 audiovisual archives that make up the film *Dreams Revived*.

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Natacha Yahi is a PhD candidate and a temporary teaching and research fellow at the Art department of the University of Lille. Her research focuses on the reuse of photographs in contemporary art as critical contributions to history. Recent publications include an article on the work of artist Ken Gonzales-Day for the collective work, *L'Image et son dehors : contours, transitions, transformations* (PUPPA, 2017) and an article on the uses of family photographs (revue *Ver(r)ue*, n°2, 2017).